Yosemite National Park

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior

Yosemite Fire Management Plan:
Ecosystems and the Wildland Urban Interface

What are the top fire management priorities?

As required in the 2001 Federal Wildland Fire Policy and the National Fire Plan, firefighter and public safety are the first priorities in every fire management activity. Following firefighter and public safety, the next priorities are ecosystem restoration and Wildland Urban Interface protection, which are regarded as equal in importance.

What is ecosystem restoration?

Fires in Yosemite and the surrounding area have been largely suppressed for the past 100 years. Ecosystem restoration is the process of returning the forest to the condition it would be in if natural processes had not been interrupted. In the absence of fire, a greater number of trees have survived than would have if fire was allowed to play its natural role of eliminating many small trees and consuming the buildup of leaves, needles, sticks, and logs. Since fires have been suppressed, forested areas in the park have become crowded with trees and the fuels underneath them have accumulated to dangerous levels. Many meadow areas have also been invaded by forests.

Before fire suppression, average fires in Yosemite were low intensity, meaning flames would have been small and not lethal to many of the mature, older trees. Now that there is more fuel on the ground and more trees in the forest, the likelihood of a high-intensity, severe wildland fire is greater. This type of event could dramatically alter the ecosystem, changing the type of vegetation and wildlife that might use the area.

What is the WIldland Urban Interface and how will it be protected?

The Wildland Urban Interface consists of developed portions of the park where structures meet wildland areas (i.e., Yosemite Valley and Wawona). Protection of the Wildland Urban Interface involves making residences, structures, communities, and areas where people congregate, safe from unwanted wildland fire. This is mostly done by reducing fuels (leaves, needles, sticks, logs, and some green vegetation) at strategic locations in close proximity to Wildland Urban Interface areas.

The *Final Yosemite Fire Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* allows for the reduction of fuels to achieve ecosystem restoration targets. By returning the ecosystem to a natural condition, fires occurring near Wildland Urban Interface areas would be easier to control and manage, because the fire intensity would be lower. By restoring the ecosystem and maintaining it, the overall ability to control fires will be easier.

What is the park currently doing to reduce the buildup of fuel around communities?

A combination of prescribed fire and mechanical thinning are used to reduce fuels. With the approved *Final Yosemite Fire Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement,* Yosemite will be able to thin some trees with chainsaws. The small trees are then piled and burned. The thinning and pile burning is followed with prescribed fire.

What are some possible strategies to reduce the buildup of fuel?

In Wildland Urban Interface areas, it may be necessary to reduce hazardous fuels to quickly provide protection from wildland fires. Strategies may include using mechanical methods, chipping, firewood sales, prescribed fire, and even heavy machinery. In wilderness areas, only chainsaws, draft animals with fetching arches, and cable yarding would be permitted.

How would protection increase under the Final Fire Management Plan?

A little less than 7,700 acres (about 1% of the park's total acreage) is incorportated in the *Final Yosemite Fire Management Plan/Environmental Impact Statement* as part of the Wildland Urban Interface. The chosen option, Alternative D, the Multiple-Action Alternative, would use aggressive techniques where needed (more restrictive treatments in all other applications) to reduce fuels in Wildland Urban Interface areas within 6 to 8 years.

What are aggressive and passive fuel reduction methods?

Aggressive treatments in Wildland Urban Interface areas include the use of mechanical equipment to clear out fuel build- up around homes, businesses, and administrative buildings. These techniques would allow the park to treat more land area per year than with passive reduction. Passive treatments can also include equipment, such as chainsaws; this equipment has less impact on the land but is slower, limiting the amount of work that would be completed annually.